

Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

# Orcutt Christian Church

A Grace Driven Church for Grace Needing People!

## ***Burning Question #45*** **Can I Trust The Bible?** **1 Thessalonians 2:13-16**

**February 11, 2018**

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### **1 Thessalonians 2:13-16 (NASB)**

**For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted *it* not *as* the word of men, but *for* what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.**

**<sup>14</sup> For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they *did* from the Jews, <sup>15</sup> who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, <sup>16</sup> hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come**

upon them to the utmost.

**John 20:30-31 (NASB)**

Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; <sup>31</sup> but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

**Luke 1:1-4 (NASB)**

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, <sup>2</sup> just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, <sup>3</sup> it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write *it* out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; <sup>4</sup> so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.

**Acts 1:1-2 (NASB)**

The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, <sup>2</sup> until the day when He was taken up *to heaven*, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen.

**2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NASB)**

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; <sup>17</sup> so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

## **I. Few Americans Believe Bible Is Literal Word of God**

According to a Gallup Poll conducted last May, 2017, ONLY 24% of Americans believe the Bible is "the actual word of God, and is to be taken literally, word for word,"  
26% view it as "a book of fables, legends, history and moral precepts recorded by man."

<http://news.gallup.com/poll/210704/record-few-americans-believe-bible-literal-word-god.aspx>

The number of people who believe the Bible to be the word of God has been steadily decreasing since the early 1970's.

According to the Pew Research Center, the increase of atheism among late teenagers and those in their early 20's is one of the most striking trends in the United States.

25% of Americans born since 1980 are atheists.

<http://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials/>

Welll, don't you have to ask WHY?

Look at the social science and history text books our young students are being taught from.

Embraced by media and enforced in schools, secular education approaches learning through the lens of "methodological naturalism."

It is presupposed that all faith claims are merely expressions of subjective preference.

The only "true" truths are claims that are divorced from *any* supernatural context and impose *no* moral obligations on human behavior.

Our young students today are subjected to an *enforced* secularism.

The idea of objective moral truth—ethical norms that really are binding on all people—is unknown to most and is rejected by the rest.

College students are encouraged to accept platitudes like "life is about asking questions, not about dogmatic answers."

Is that the answer?

That there are no answers?

Claiming to have answers is viewed as "impolite."

On life's ultimate questions, it is much more socially acceptable to "suspend judgment."

"Tolerance" today essentially means, "Because my truth is, well, *my truth*, no one may ever question any behavior or belief I hold." This "standard" has become so ingrained that it is now impossible to rationally critique any belief or behavior without a backlash of criticism.

According to some research, today's young folk are enamored by books and blogs run by God-hating "thinkers."

The little neighborhood church is assumed to be irrelevant, and there is no cultural guilt anymore for those who abandon involvement.

Is it really any wonder that kids raised in the churches of 21st century America aren't often stirred to lifelong commitment? Most churches are so occupied with "marketing" themselves to prospective attendees that they wouldn't dream of risking their "brand" by speaking tough-as-nails truth.

What you hear and read over and over is for the church to be "Seeker Sensitive."

You hear over and over that "Christianity is not a religion, it is a relationship."

Sounds nice.

Sounds catchy.

Sounds politically correct.

But dead wrong.

WHY do I say that?

Well, look it up in your Merriam-Webster.

It defines "religion" as ...

1. the service and worship of God
2. commitment or devotion to religious faith or observance
3. a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices
4. a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith

As I understand it, "religion" is made up of two words:

"*re*" means "again."

"*ligio*" means "**to bind.**"

And "*religare*" then means "**to bind fast**"

Augustine understood it to mean to bring us back into a total committed relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dumb down Christianity.

Make it safe.

Make it politically correct.

The result is "Christianity Lite."

It is true that our culture has grown visibly antithetical to God and Christian commitment.

But in addressing the spiritual attrition rate of young America, it must be admitted that a Christianity stripped of a commitment to God and Scripture has left the Church without foundations.

For evangelical youth mentored by many a hip and zany "Minister to Students," commitment to Jesus lasts about as long as the time it takes to wash the stains out of T-shirts worn at the senior-year paintball retreat.

God only knows the degree of our complicity, and also the time when we'll be concerned enough to change direction.

### **Jude 3 (NASB)**

**<sup>3</sup> Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.**

We are called in Scripture to contend for our faith.

I think that that means something different today than it would have meant a generation ago.

Because Christian assumptions, which used to be taken for granted in our society are now no longer shared.

Very interestingly we have seen in recent years, not just atheism, but a kind of new atheism.

More militant, more suave, more effective than the atheism of the past.

In fact if you thought of atheism twenty years ago you'd think of someone like the activist Madelyn Murray O'Hair.

Or you might think of some kind of an ACLU lawyer.

Not an atheism with mass appeal and evangelistic desires.

I'm thinking of people like **Dr. Richard Dawkins**, who was the University of Oxford's Professor for Public Understanding of Science from 1995 until 2008, and the author of the book The God Delusion, that's sold some two million copies.

Dawkins is an atheist, and is well known for his criticism of creationism and intelligent design.

In The God Delusion, Dawkins contends that a supernatural creator almost certainly does not exist and that religious faith is a delusion.

And, then there is the English writer **Christopher Hitchens**.

He's the author of the book God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything.

He regarded the concept of a god or supreme being as a totalitarian belief that destroys individual freedom, and argued that free expression and scientific discovery should replace religion.

These new atheists have a very different agenda than the atheists of the past.

They really want to make every Christian feel like a total idiot for believing in the authenticity of the Bible.

Their agenda is to totally discredit the Bible and its influence.

You believe someone was born of a virgin?

Walked on water?

Brought dead people back to life?

Are you out of your mind?

We're living in the twentieth century!  
Don't you believe the world has fixed laws?  
Do you think these laws can be suspended at somebody's whim or discretion?  
With this steady media fed propoganda against Holy Scriptures ...

## II. Can I Trust The Bible?

Well, I want to say up front, you can't turn off your God given brain.

I just can't agree with the Calvinist John MacArthur in his 2006 monograph on **Why We Believe the Bible Is True**.  
But I take objection, not only to MacArthur, but to most Calvinists on Why We Believe the Bible is true.  
It could be MacArthur, Cornelius Van Til, or John Piper.  
Now, you are probably wondering why?

Well, let me quote MacArthur from his Calvinist perspective:

"Evidences aren't going to cut it on their own. Human reason can't get you there. The natural man does not because he cannot. He does not believe because he cannot believe."

From his Calvinist perspective, faith and belief has to be given by God.

Calvinist teachers say that they can never persuade natural men of the gospel no matter how openly, clearly and earnestly they may preach it.

It is like presenting a sermon to a corpse - there is no response.

But, I want to say again, you can't turn off your God given brain.

In this sermon, we will adopt the attitude of the "**noble-minded**" Bereans:

**Acts 17:10-12 (NASB)**

**10 The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. 11 Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. 12 Therefore many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men.**

A long time ago, I determined to find out if the Bible was the word of God, and if so, I determined to live by what it said. And if the Bible was not the Word of God, I determined to find that out and act accordingly.

And, what did I found out?

I found out beyond any possibility that there is a God, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that the Bible is the Word of God.

Today it's with me not a matter of mere probability nor even of mere belief, but of absolute certainty.

I'm going to give you some of the reasons why I believe the Bible to be the Word of God.

And believe me, I just said "**some of the reasons.**"

I do after all have a time constraint.

Can you find good reason to trust the ancient bible?

It's an old book in a world where age is no longer considered a virtue.

If I am going to trust it, I have to have good reasons.

People who trust the Bible say it is different from any other book ever published.

They say it is the ONLY book authored by God, and shows us how to know Him, how to live, and how to have eternal life.

And you know the objections:

It's filled with errors.

It's not scientifically reliable.

It's not historically accurate.

It's outdated.

It's the work of men.

I agree with the writer known as Clement of Rome, who wrote just a couple decades following the death of the Apostle John:

“The Scriptures are true and given by the Holy Spirit. You know that nothing unrighteous or counterfeit is written in them.”

SO, I say You Can Trust the Bible ...

## **A. Because of It's Textural Preservation**

Now, what do I mean it's textural preservation?

Several years ago when I had a TV connection, there was a documentary on the Bible.

A interviewer was asking people on the street what they thought about so many different Bible translations.

One lady answered: "If King James English was good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for me!"

Well, we can only feel sorry for her misinformation.

You know the Bible was written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek.

You know the Bible was written over a time span of 1500 years.

You know it was written on three continents: Africa, Asia and Europe.

Remember there are seven continents: North America, South America, Australia, Antarctica, Africa, Asia and Europe.

Why they count Europe as a separate one from Asia is beyond me, and that is why some countries use a 6 continent system calling one Eurasia.

But, I hear you saying, Africa?

The first five books of the Bible, called the Pentateuch, are traditionally held to have been written by Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai, which is in the country of Egypt and continent of Africa.

Also, Jeremiah may have written at least some of his book from

Egypt, where he was taken after the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar.

You know that the bible had 40 authors.

There are 30 authors in the Old Testament and 10 in the New Testament.

Some of the stories in the Bible go back 2,000 years prior to the birth of Jesus.

And, the critics say with all that time span, and all those authors, and all those locations, surely there are problems with the purity of the text.

And, up front, none of the original manuscripts written by the biblical authors are still in existence.

So, how can we be confident that the texts we hold in our hands were the same as the originals.

Let's think about the Old Testament first.

The Old Testament books were written primarily in Hebrew on either papyrus or animal skins.

When a copy wore out, a new copy was made, and the old destroyed.

Since they didn't have computers and copy machines, the copies had to be laboriously made by hand.

And the Jews had stringent rules for making those copies.

The scribes who did the new copies were called **Masoretes**.

And the texts they provided are called the **Masoretic texts**.

They had a highly elaborate system which required precise counting.

First, they would count all the words on a page to be copied.

Then when they finished copying the page, they would count the letters on the copy to see if the number agreed.

If the count didn't agree, they destroyed the new copy and started all over.

The texts of these Masoretic scribes agree completely with scrolls from the Dead Sea caves dated a thousand years earlier.

In the case of the New Testament, the same procedures were followed, and the only variations are minor changes of spelling, like the British "labour" and the American "labor."

And, scholars have at their hands some 25,500 manuscripts, the earliest dated at 110 A.D.

And, that fragment dated at 110 is John 18:31-33, 37-38.

And, as you recall, the Apostle John died about 100 A.D.

So, even though we no longer have the original manuscripts, the process of copying assures us of a remarkable accuracy.

I recall talking with one of the scholars working on the accuracy and authenticity of the ancient New Testament manuscripts.

He said we could absolutely rest assured that what we had was for superior to anything from antiquity.

Now keep in mind that we have over 25,500 manuscripts and the earliest is dated at 110 A.D.

In comparison, **Homer's Iliad**, the greatest of all Greek classical works only has 647 manuscripts, and the earliest is dated in the eighth century A.D.

In comparison, **Euripides' tragedies**, the next greatest collection of Greek works, only has 330 manuscripts, and the earliest is dated around the 12th century.

**Caesar's Gallic Wars** only has 10 manuscripts, and the earliest is dated around 900 A.D.

And, the Jewish historian, **Josephus**, whom you hear me quote from time to time, and who witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem in 72 AD, only has 9 manuscripts, and the earliest is 500 years after Josephus.

Now, here is the clincher.

The Chester Beatty collection of New Testament papyri contain

almost the entire New Testament, and dates to around 200 A.D.

No scholars doubt the authenticity of Homer, or Euripides, or Caesar's Galic Wars, or of Jesephus.

What, you need to keep in mind is there is not another collection of books in the world like our Holy Scriptures.

Can you trust our Christian Bible?  
You bet you can!

I took a little longer to share the reasonableness of it's textural preservation.

So, now, I am going to be a little briefer in the following reasons to trust the bible.

I say You Can Trust the Bible ...

## **B. Because of its Historical Accuracy**

The Old and New Testaments are filled with references to specific people, places, and events.

**Dr. Nelson Glueck** was the leading Jewish archaeologist. I heard him give a lecture on the reliable scholarship and the findings of the archaeologists.

He said:

"It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference."

Let me give you a couple of examples of the bible historical accuracy.

The Old Testament mentions a people known as **the Hittites** about 50 times, but for centuries there was no evidence of such a people. And of course the sceptics went wild about this.

However, in 1906, the Hittite capital was uncovered about 90 miles of Ankara, the capital of Turkey.

Another example is the ancient **city of Ebla**, in northern Syria. It was the leading city of commerce, and the crossroads of wealthy and prosperity, until the Hittites destroyed it in the 16th century B.C. And then archaeological research discovered a vast wealth of historical materials that supports the biblical record. The Ebla documents provide some of the best evidence that some of the people described in the Old Testament actually existed.

**David** - The critics' verdict was that David was "nothing more than a figure of religious mythology." Then in 1993 the Tel-Dan Stele was discovered inscribed "house • of David"

**Pilate** – Again the critics' verdict was that Pilate was "religions mythology" Then in 1961 the Pilate inscription was found in Caesarea reading "Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judea."

**Caiaphas** - The High Priest who engineered the murder of Jesus. Then in 1990 his burial tomb was opened, and his bone box discovered.

**Jesus** - Two French atheistic philosophers in the early 18th century argued that Christianity was an amalgamation of various ancient mythologies, and that Jesus was a totally mythical character. But the fact is Jesus is mentioned by three first century historians.  
The Jewish historian Josephus  
The Roman historian Tacitus  
The Roman Governor Pliny the Younger  
The second century Roman historian Suetonius

Think about Jesus Christ divine influence upon all subsequent history.

Jesus Christ was without a doubt one of three things:

1. He was either the son of God in a unique sense, a divine person incarnate in human form or else
2. He was the most daring imposter that ever lived or else
3. He was one of the most hopeless lunatics.

That he claimed to be the son of God in a unique sense and that all men should honor him even as they honored the Father (as he said in John 5:23) and that he and the Father were one (as he said in John 10:30) and that he that had seen him had seen the Father (as he said in John 14:9), of this there can be no honest doubt.

Jesus was then either the divine person that he claimed to be or the most daring imposter or a most hopeless lunatic.

Was his influence upon subsequent history the influence of a lunatic?

Was his influence upon subsequent history the influence of an imposter?

No one but one whose own heart was thoroughly tainted with deceit and fraud would think of saying so.

Not an imposter.

Not a lunatic.

We have only one alternative left.

He was what he claimed to be, the Son of God.

Jesus was God the Son, and your Savior.

By the way, Archaeology has not proven so helpful for other religious writings.

Consider the **Book of Mormon**.

Not a single solitary item, location, ancient text has been found to support its claims.

There is not another collection of books in the world like your bible.

The bible is truly miraculous.

I say You Can Trust the Bible ...

### **C. Because of its Approach to Science**

The Bible is not a science text book.

It often uses figures of speech to describe life that scientists would explain in different terms.

For example, it speaks of the sun setting and of the four corners of the earth.

And of course, scientists speak of those events in different terms.

But when the Bible does speak directly about matters of science, it speaks correctly.

The Bible also touches on matters of science in ways that seem to go beyond what was known to humankind at the time.

Let's consider a few instances that are remarkable.

### **1. The Universe Had a Beginning.**

**Genesis 1:1-2 (NASB)**

**<sup>1</sup> In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. <sup>2</sup>  
The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep**

The very first verse of the Bible, written circa 1350 BC, states that the Universe had a beginning.

However, the idea that the Universe is static, that is without beginning or end, was accepted until 1927, when the Belgian astrophysicist, Georges Lemaître, put forth his theory and mathematical equations to support the concept that the Universe had a beginning.

Based upon his original work, other scientists fine-tuned the idea and it has become the dominate concept Big Bang theory of the nature of our Universe.

### **2. The Expanding Universe.**

**Isaiah 40:22 (NASB)**

**<sup>22</sup> It is He who sits above the circle of the earth, And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in.**

Isaiah states that God “**stretches out the heavens**”; that is, the universe is expanding.

The scientific validation of Isaiah's 'expanding universe' statement did not come until Astronomer Edwin Hubble and his associates proved it, in the 1920s, by observations of movement in distant galaxies.

Thus, the Bible was proven to be correct 2500 years before scientists confirmed it to be so.

### **3. The Spherical Nature of the Earth.**

Isaiah says God **sits above the circle of the earth**

4The word translated “**circle**” here is the Hebrew word **chuwg** which indicates something spherical and rounded - not something that is flat or square.

The Book of Isaiah dates to the 700s BC.

Thus, we know that Isaiah's emphatic statement of the spherical nature of the Earth precedes Greek speculations on the subject by a good 350-400 years.

### **4. The Earth Is Without Physical Supports.**

The Egyptians believe the Earth was supported upon four poles.

The Hindu scriptures claimed the Earth was supported by four elephants which stood upon the back of a sea-turtle.

The ancient Greeks held that the titan, Atlas, held the Earth on his shoulders.

The Bible never put forward such myths, but said,

**Job 26:7 (NASB)**

**7 "He stretches out the north over empty space And hangs the earth on nothing.**

The scientific validation of the Earth not having physical supports but suspending and held in space by gravitational forces came in AD 1687 by Sir Isaac Newton.

That means the Bible spoke of this scientific fact over 3500 years before Newton.

Job's and Newton's position received visual proof when manned

rockets orbited the Earth a mere 50 years ago.

## **5. The Hydrologic Cycle.**

The Hydrologic Cycle is the scientific term for the process whereby Earth's water follows an on-going cycle of evaporation from lakes and oceans, condensation in the atmosphere (formation of water-bearing clouds) and precipitation (falls to the ground by rain and snow), collects in bodies of water (lakes and oceans) and repeats the cycle again.

The 'discoverer' of this theory was Bernard Palissey in AD 1580. However, the Bible described the Hydrologic Cycle 3500 years earlier than Palissey -

### **Job 26:8-9 (NASB)**

**<sup>8</sup> "He wraps up the waters in His clouds, And the cloud does not burst under them. <sup>9</sup> "He obscures the face of the full moon And spreads His cloud over it.**

### **Job 36:27-29 (NASB)**

**<sup>27</sup> "For He draws up the drops of water, They distill rain from the mist, <sup>28</sup> Which the clouds pour down, They drip upon man abundantly. <sup>29</sup> "Can anyone understand the spreading of the clouds, The thundering of His pavilion?**

### **Psalm 135:6-7 (NASB)**

**<sup>6</sup> Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps. <sup>7</sup> He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth; Who makes lightnings for the rain, Who brings forth the wind from His treasuries.**

### **Ecclesiastes 1:7 (NASB)**

**<sup>7</sup> All the rivers flow into the sea, Yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers flow, There they flow again.**

## **6. The Value of Blood.**

### **Leviticus 17:11 (NASB)**

## **11 'For the life of the flesh is in the blood,**

And that was written prior to 1400 BC.

Here we learn that the physical body's life and health is dependent upon its blood.

In 1616, William Harvey discovered that blood circulation is the key factor in physical life - confirming what the Bible revealed 3,000 years earlier.

## **7. Mankind Created From One Man and Woman.**

**Acts 17:26 (NASB)**

**26 and He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined *their* appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation,**

**Genesis 3:20 (NASB)**

**20 Now the man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all *the* living.**

The Bible teaches as fact that all Mankind descends from a single man and woman.

In the last twenty-five years, researchers have discovered that we have all descended from one gene pool.

In 1987, Allan Wilson presented research showing that by analyzing **Mitochondrial DNA** from women all over the world, it was clear that Mankind descended from a single woman.

A 1995 study of a section of Y chromosomes from 38 men from different ethnic groups around the world was consistent with the biblical teaching that we all come from one man.

Thus, the Bible's assertion that Mankind has a common male and female parentage, has been confirmed by science almost 3500 years later.

Now, I want to recap one very important point mentioned a few minutes ago...

If you combined all of the manuscripts of the writings of Homer,

Plato, Euripides, Sophocles, Thucydides, Aristophanes, Aristotle, Herodotus, Demosthenes, Caesar, Livy, Lucretius, Pliny, Seutonius and Tacitus...they would number about 1062 manuscripts.

In comparison, there are presently over 5,800 Greek manuscripts in existence today for the New Testament.

Thats 82% more.

Because they are so numerous, the New Testament manuscripts can be cross-checked for accuracy and they have been found to be 99.5% textually pure.

Biblical scholar, **Dr. David M. Steimle** writes that the Greek New Testament,has 138,162 words.

*Of these 138,162 Greek words, only 400 words are in doubt, and none of those impact our faith.*

For those of you who are into statistics, that is 99.8% accurate.

That is amazing accuracy.

If the critics of the Bible dismiss the New Testament as unreliable information, then they must also dismiss the reliability of the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Caesar, Homer, and the other authors of antiquity I just mentioned.

On the other hand, if the critics acknowledge the historicity and writings of those other individuals, then they must also retain the historicity and writings of the New Testament authors; after all, the evidence for the New Testament's reliability is far greater than the others.

It is good evidence on which to base trust in the reliability of the New Testament.

Well, I said that I was going to give you some of the reasons why I believe the Bible to be the Word of God.

And believe me, I just said "**some of the reasons.**"

There is so much more that could be said, but for me, I sing ...

**The B-I-B-L-E,  
Yes that's the book for me,  
I stand alone on the Word of God,  
The B-I-B-L-E.**

**The B-I-B-L-E,  
Yes that's the book for me,  
I read and pray, trust and obey,  
The B-I-B-L-E.**

Now, how do you apply the truth that the bible is God's word to you?

If you claim to be a believer, do you trust the bible enough to put it into practice?

Are you as willing to obey its commands as you are to claim its promises?

If you haven't committed your life to Jesus the Messiah, what are you going to do with the Bible?

The Bible is the only book that tells you how to have eternal life.

You can't be neutral about what God commands you to do.

You must either accept what it says, or you must reject it.

If you accept it, and do what God says you must do to have eternal life, heaven awaits.

If you reject it, you will spend eternity out of God's loving presence, because hell awaits.

What are you going to do with the Bible?

**Prayer and Invitation**

## February 11 Lesson 11 (NIV) **A Disciplined Faith**

Devotional Reading: Psalm 34:1-14

Background Scripture: James 3:12

### JAMES 3:1-12

1 Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. 2 We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check. 3 When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. 4 Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. 5 Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. 6 The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. 7 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. 11 Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? 12 My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

### **KEY VERSE**

***But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.—James 3:8***

### **Introduction**

#### **A. Chemistry, Character, or Something Else?**

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, more and more advocates of the “It’s not your character; it’s your chemistry” school of thought have emerged. This is the next round of the old “nurture vs. nature” debate, also known as “environment vs. heredity.” The

question is why we behave as we do. One side says behavior is learned (this is the character/nurture/environment side). The other says behavior is hardwired from birth (this is the chemistry/nature/heredity side).

This issue has profound implications. For example, researchers on the chemistry side of the debate argue that most addictions are caused by a deficiency in dopamine, a natural “feel-good” brain chemical. Therefore the preferred treatment, they say, is to change one’s chemistry rather than build one’s character.

The issue is complicated, and there is evidence for each position in various contexts. But the idea that behavioral issues do not stem from a lack of learned self-control tends to lessen responsibility for doing or saying what we should not. But James points to another, deeper cause.

## **B. Lesson Background**

The background to last week’s lesson applies to this one as well, so that information need not be repeated here. But since today’s lesson draws heavily on figures of speech, some background information in that regard is in order.

Figures of speech add interest and excitement to writing, and chief among these are metaphors. A metaphor takes an idea and imposes it on an unrelated but familiar idea to help explain the qualities of the original. An example from the ancient world is the assertion “Achilles is a lion.” This does not mean the Greek hero literally had a shaggy reddish-orange mane, sharp claws, large teeth and walked on all fours. It means, rather, that Achilles was a brave, courageous warrior in battle.

Metaphors abound in our speech, so much so that we don’t always notice them. Rather than refer to a particular car’s color as “gray,” we might say it is “battleship gray.” This does not mean the car has any of the size or armament of a warship. The use of the word *battleship* as a metaphor for a shade of gray helps us visualize how the car appears: it is neither nearly black nor nearly white (two possibilities for gray). An emotional element is also present, as *battleship gray* suggests drabness.

James uses a variety of word pictures, including metaphor. These

are drawn from life experiences shared with his readers. This style of writing is vivid, and James chose his figurative language carefully to help the readers better understand the urgency and importance of his topic.

## I. Lack of Control

(James 3:1-5a)

### A. Issue of Qualification (vv. 1, 2)

**1. Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.**

James is addressing the topic of teachers. With the use of *we* he includes himself in this group.

James warns that the role of teacher should be considered soberly, because teachers are under great scrutiny. We see the importance of the words *more strictly* when we realize that teachers' thoughts and ideas are made public. Good teachers are not simply relayers of correct information, they are also interpreters (compare Titus 1:10-2:1; regarding degrees of judgment, see Luke 12:47, 48; 20:47).

Teachers in the first-century church had two primary responsibilities. First, they were to teach the fundamentals of the Christian faith (Jude 3); these were truths they had learned from other teachers (2 Timothy 2:2). Second, they were to interpret the Old Testament Scriptures from a Christian perspective (Acts 17:2). Since James wrote in a time when teachers did not have all the New Testament (because not all its books were yet written and compiled), the teaching function was especially subject to error and misinterpretation.

### How to Say It

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Achilles Uh-kih-leez.

Corinthians Ko-rin-thee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).

Ecclesiastes Ik-leez-ee-**as**-teez.

Gehenna Geh-hen-uh (*G* as in *get*).

Molek Mo-leck.

The teaching function in the church today is easier in one sense: we have the completed New Testament. But the era of the Information Age makes the teaching function more difficult in

another sense: faster communication means faster communication of error and ridicule. That fact may tempt us to embrace an old saying attributed to Abraham Lincoln: “Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt.”

This humorous but cynical view should not intimidate Christian teachers into silence. The church needs the spiritually mature to open their mouths and impart godly teaching and wisdom to others. But be forewarned: you will be judged by God.

**2. We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.**

The word *stumble* gives us a word picture of careless use of the tongue (*in what they say*). The phrase *we all stumble* means all of us make the mistake of using speech that offends. The person who is never guilty of verbal miscues does not exist. The hypothetical person who achieves perfection in speech would, by extension, be able to control every aspect of his or her life. That is, he or she is able *to keep their whole body in check*. The Greek verb used here also occurs in James 1:26, where it is translated “keep a tight rein on.” The following verse develops this idea.

## **B. Issue of Relative Size (vv. 3-5a)**

**3. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.**

A bridle usually includes a bit, a metal device inserted into the mouth of a horse. The bit results in uncomfortable pressure, causing the horse to respond to the pressure of the reins attached to the bridle. If the rider pulls back on both reins, the horse will slow until the pressure from the reins is released. If the rider pulls the right rein, the trained horse will turn right until the pressure from the bit is relieved.

This is an amazing thing for James, that a metal bit that fits in one’s hand can control such a large animal! The analogy is how the human tongue (the symbol of speech for James) has an influence out of proportion to its size.

**4. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small**

**rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.**

The next metaphor is drawn from the world of sailing ships. Such vessels may be large and strong, able to withstand the pressure of mighty winds. Despite this bulk, the ship can be turned by *a very small rudder*. This steering mechanism of ancient ships is something like a large oar fastened to the side of a ship. If the end of the steering oar is pushed to the right by *the pilot* (helmsman), the ship goes to the right and vice versa.

Like the bridle and bit illustration, the point is that a small device can turn a mighty ship. With the tiny tongue, a small lapse in judgment that is spoken can have an enormous influence on one's life or the lives of others.

### *WEIGHING OUR WORDS*

One trip to the pediatrician involved my daughter at the tender age of 13. Girls at that age think a lot about appearance, a problematic issue in the development of self-image. Because of a rapid growth spurt that year, it seemed that every bit of food my daughter ate went to getting taller. As a result, she appeared almost skeletal. At one point in the exam, the doctor said to her, "Your weight is much higher than most girls your age." As the doctor paused, my daughter looked at me with large eyes.

Dismayed that the doctor would say something that would be taken so wrong by a teenage girl, I exclaimed, "Yes, but that's because she is much taller than most girls her age. Look at her! She's so thin, she almost looks unhealthy!"

"Oh yes, of course. I was going to say that," the doctor added. Unfortunately, the damage was done. For several months after that, my daughter asked me if she really was overweight like the doctor said, and she examined herself daily for extra pounds. We might say that the pediatrician's words carried weight.

What we say can affect others for months or years to come. That's just as true today as it was in the first century AD.

—*L. M. W.*

**5a. Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.**

James personifies *the tongue* as a pint-size fellow who makes

boasts far out of proportion to his size (compare Psalm 73:8, 9). But we know it is not a little muscle in the mouth that is making ill-advised boasts, it is the person who owns this tongue. The tongue is only a tool for boasting; vain claims of glory start in a person's heart and mind.

*What Do You Think?*

What safeguards can we adopt to protect friendships from the negative effects of boasting?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

In terms of attitudes

In terms of prayer

In distinguishing between godly and ungodly boasting (2 Corinthians 10:12-18; etc.)

Considering the warning of Psalm 12:3, 4

## II. Result of Failure

(James 3:5b-8)

**A. It Burns (vv. 5b, 6)**

**5b. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.**

James moves to another metaphor: the phenomenon of *fire*. Big fires start as small fires. We know that a single spark can result in a fire that burns down *a great forest*. Likewise, a few unwise words spoken carelessly can cause permanent, life-changing damage.

Reputations—either those of the ones speaking or those of the ones being spoken about—can be ruined. Most of us have had the experience of changing our opinion of someone after hearing unwise words spoken in an unguarded moment. “The words of the reckless pierce like swords” (Proverbs 12:18).

*What Do You Think?*

How do (or should) methods of reconciliation change, if at all, after damage caused by the tongue becomes enormous?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

In the workplace

In family life

In the church

Other

**6. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of**

**the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.**

What is implied in the previous verse is explicit here: the uncontrolled tongue not only causes widespread external damage, it also ends up being suicidal. James pictures this self-destruction as being a *life on fire*, a life that is fueled as though *set on fire by hell*. The word *hell* translates the Greek word *Gehenna*, which itself derives from the Old Testament's *Hinnom*. This is the name of a valley used to burn garbage in James's day; it is located just south of Jerusalem.

Traced further back, this valley gained a terrible reputation because of babies burned there in sacrifice to the false god Molek (see 2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 32:35). It was seen as a place of fire, and *Gehenna* becomes a metaphor for the eternal fire of the last judgment, the implication here. The person who ignores the need to maintain control over his or her speech is risking eternity. This is serious business.

We should stress before moving on that James's figurative, metaphorical use of *Gehenna* is much stronger than a literalistic understanding would be. The latter sense would see *Gehenna* as referring only to the valley outside Jerusalem, not to the place of eternal destruction into which both body and soul can be cast (Matthew 10:28).

### ***OPEN MOUTH, INSERT FOOT***

I was about 17 when it happened. I had known my friend Leah (name changed) my whole life. We had done many things together, and I considered her one of my best friends.

In youth group one night, Leah wanted to know how it was possible for people who had been married for 20 years suddenly to claim they had "fallen out of love." In youthful overconfidence I smugly replied, "They must not have been in love to start with, because people don't just fall out of love. Love is a commitment." I remember Leah's hurt expression, and I saw one of the leaders take her aside afterward to talk. I wondered what was up.

A few weeks later, I found out that her parents were divorcing after 20 years of marriage. Recalling my unsympathetic words, I felt terrible. I apologized to her right away; she forgave me and

graciously acknowledged that I didn't know what was going on. Even so, my arrogant words must have stung. Leah and I grew apart after that, in part because of what I had said. As James says, "The tongue . . . is a fire." It can incinerate relationships.

—*L. M. W.*

## **B. It Poisons (vv. 7, 8)**

### **7. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind,**

James now begins a comparison from another setting: that of humanity's taming of various creatures. He divides these into four categories: land *animals*, *birds*, *reptiles* and *sea creatures*. By *tamed* James does not mean that humans have made pets or farm animals out of all these creatures (compare Job 41:1-5). The idea of taming is closer to the command of Genesis 1:28 for humankind to "rule over" all creatures. In blunt terms, this means there is no creature that humans have not been able to conquer and kill. Humans exercise dominion over all earthly creatures, whether for good or bad.

### **8. but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.**

Animals can be tamed, but can the tongue? No one truly brings his or her tongue into full submission. As we ponder this, we should be careful not to take this verse out of context. It would be wrong to conclude, "James says no one can tame the tongue, so why even try? It is a futile waste of time." Those who accept that argument should read the previous verses again. Although no one is able to keep his or her tongue perfectly controlled, we must make the effort since uncontrolled speech destroys. James's word-picture of *deadly poison* brings to mind Psalm 140:3: "[Violent men] make their tongues as sharp as a serpent's; the poison of vipers is on their lips" (compare Romans 3:13).

#### *What Do You Think?*

What counsel would you offer someone who is looking for help to tame his or her tongue?

#### *Talking Points for Your Discussion*

In terms of spiritual disciplines to practice

In terms of friendships to cultivate and avoid  
In terms of biblically sound resources  
Other

### III. Lack of Consistency

(James 3:9-12)

#### A. Problem Observed (vv. 9, 10)

**9, 10. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.**

Having used many comparisons to show the destructive power of the tongue, James now turns to the paradoxical nature of much of our speech. We have only one mouth, and we use it both to *praise* God and to *curse* others. This makes no sense! It makes sense to use our tongues to praise God. But after doing so, why would we then use *the same mouth* to curse people, who are *made in God's likeness* (Genesis 1:26, 27; 5:1; 9:6)? Because of that likeness, cursing people is perilously close to cursing God himself!

We might apply this to a modern situation this way: How can we use the same social media both to post messages of witness for Christ and personal attacks against those who rub us the wrong way? The bottom line is that we cannot successfully live this double life. Mouths that easily bless God should also offer godly and encouraging words to others. We must have consistency in our speech and let it be controlled by the impulse to use our words to praise and bless the Lord.

*What Do You Think?*

What specific steps can we take to uphold the image of God in others when we're tempted to vilify them instead?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

Regarding those of differing political views

Regarding those of differing doctrinal views

Regarding those who have vilified us

Other

#### B. Problem Illustrated (vv. 11, 12)

**11, 12. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a**

## **grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.**

James ends this section with a flurry of word pictures. These illustrate the inconsistency of praising God and then abusing others with the same mouth. In this, he continues the lessons of the creation account in Genesis 1. There, the author notes the nature of created plant life to be that everything reproduces according to its kind (1:11, 12). The fruit a plant bears reveals its inner nature, since fig trees do not produce olives and grapevines do not produce figs.

We have no trouble whatsoever declaring what is and is not an olive tree, what is and is not a grapevine, etc. The reason we have no problem in this regard is that we know for certain that this morning's olive tree will not become this afternoon's grapevine. But we humans do something directly contrary to this model when we hear a person praising God on Sunday, and then cursing his boss and coworkers on Monday. What is that person's true nature? The illogic of this inconsistency is reinforced by the bookends that begin verse 11 and conclude verse 12: comparisons with the quality of spring water. In James's territory, the area around Jerusalem, springs or natural fountains of water are highly prized, for they provide a year-round water supply. Not all springs are of the same quality, though. Some are brackish or salty; others are fresh. But the quality at any given location does not change minute to minute. A salty spring consistently yields a brackish, unsatisfying product; the fresh spring consistently produces potable water. Our speech should be like the latter, not only in its refreshing nature, but also consistently so.

The logic of James's argument is airtight: we must not settle for mixed patterns of good and evil in our talk. Speak well of others. Speak consistently well. This will improve relationships in the church. It will also encourage your own heart and spirit.

### *What Do You Think?*

How do you go about using your tongue in a way that you would want others to emulate?

### *Talking Points for Your Discussion*

When around unbelievers

When around fellow believers

## Conclusion

### A. Think Twice Before Hitting “Send”

At the beginning of my ministry, a wise associate and friend told me that when I wanted to unload on someone verbally out of frustration, I should write that person a letter. Then I should put the letter in my desk for several days. After that, it would be best to destroy the letter and move on. In my hotheaded youthful days, I actually did this several times. To put it as a double negative, I have never regretted not sending those hurtful letters!

Today I am more likely to rehearse a conversation I want to have with a thorn-in-the-flesh person I think I need to confront. These conversations often happen in my car as I drive alone. They are often quite loud and intense, but once I have said my piece to my ever-listening automobile, I am done and can move on. I’m not sure if James would fully approve of either practice, but they have often kept my tongue from uttering hurtful and malicious words.

Social media postings cause great problems for many today. Hot-tempered messages result in lost jobs and irreconcilable breaches in relationships. An often repeated word of advice is “think twice before you hit ‘send.’” When you rethink the fiery, flaming posting, think strongly about hitting “delete” instead of “send.” You may be controlling your fingers rather than your tongue, but I think James would approve.

On a scale from 1 to 10, how do you rate on how well you have tamed your tongue? This further counsel from wise Solomon may help:

***Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. (Ecclesiastes 5:2).***

We will never regret harsh or hurtful words if they are never spoken.

### B. Prayer

Father, we claim you as Lord of our lives, but too often we withhold one area from your control. We have hurt others, disappointed you, and embarrassed ourselves in our speech. Give

us the strength and wisdom to control our tongues so that you are pleased with every word we say, type, or text. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

**C. Thought to Remember**

Problems of the tongue are  
problems of the heart.